How to Build Consensus and Manage Dysfunction in a Group Setting

Project Manager Users Group

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Good afternoon everyone! My name is Dirk Huggett and I am an IT Business Analyst for ITD. I am excited to be here with all of you today to discuss consensus building and how to manage dysfunctions in a group.

Who has either participated or lead a meeting in which you thought you had resolved an issue only to find out days down the road that many of the participants now disagree with the solution? <<raise hand>> That can be very frustrating can't it? <<nod head>> Chances are you did not really reach a consensus in that first meeting.

Today we will discuss how you can make sure you can get that consensus level and since dysfunctional behavior can inhibit our ability to reach consensus, we will talk about some ways to overcome that dysfunctional behavior.

We have a lot of material to cover, but I want this to be as interactive as possible so please feel free to ask questions as they come up. I want to make sure you can walk away with as much technique as possible.

So let's take a quick look at our agenda…

Agenda

- Opening
- Discuss Consensus
- Exercise in Consensus
- Discuss Dysfunction
- Exercise
- Q&A
- Closing

We are working our way through the opening processes.

Next we will start looking at how we can create and maintain consensus.

As I said, I want this discussion to be interactive, so we will be doing a couple of exercises to help us work through the processes.

Next will begin discussing the types of dysfunctions and some techniques on handling them. Again we will get all of you to participate.

I will try to leave some time for questions and answers before we wrap things up.

Speaking of which, are there any questions before we get started.

Consensus

- Understanding Disagreement
- Create a Consensus Focus
  - Start with Consensus
  - Decide if Agreement is Necessary
  - Let Participants Seek Agreement
- Maintain a Consensus Focus
  - Steps to develop consensus

OK, Let's take a look at Consensus.

First, we need to understand the different types of disagreement we may be facing. This information will help identify the best ways to overcome the disagreement and reach consensus.

Next we need to create the consensus focus to make sure everyone understands what we are trying to achieve.

Once that focus is set, we need to maintain it. We will cover several steps on how you can develop a consensus.

Understanding Disagreement

Three Reasons People Tend to Disagree

- Level 1 – **Each has not clearly heard or understood** the other's alternative and/or their reasons for supporting the alternative.
- Level 2 – Each has heard and understood the alternative or supporting reasons, but has had **different experiences or** holds different **values** that result in a different preference.
- Level 3 – Disagreement is based on **personality/ past history** with one another, or other factors that have nothing to do with the alternatives.

So let's take a look at disagreement. Two people generally disagree for one of three reasons:

First there is the Level 1 disagreement. In this case, each person has not clearly heard or understood the other's alternative and/or their reasons for supporting the alternative. This is the most common cause of disagreement. This level of disagreement can usually be overcome by making sure all the pertinent details for each side are covered in the discussion.

Next is the Level 2 disagreement. Here, each person has heard and understood the alternative or supporting reasons, but has had different experiences or holds different values that result in a different preference. You will often find this type of disagreement when you have a mixed group of technical and business staff. Each see the issue based upon their individual experiences and since those experiences are so different, the disagreements can be difficult. However, you can overcome these issues. It may take more time or effort but it can be done, and often you come out with a better result. <<Discuss Jennifer & I>>

Finally, there is the Level 3 disagreement. This is based on personality/past history between the individuals, or other factors that have nothing to do with the alternatives. Often, these issues can not be resolved within the time context of a meeting. Here are some suggestions on what you can do with a Level 3 issue…

Level 3 Disagreement

- Take a break; meet with the parties privately to indicate to them you do not believe the issue can be solved in the session.
- Seek agreement to put the issue on the Issues List for resolution outside the session
- Agree to take the issue together to a higher source to make a decision

First, take a break and meet with the parties privately to indicate to them you do not believe the issue can be solved in the session.

Then seek agreement to put the issue on the Issues List for resolution outside the session

Finally get everyone to agree to take the issue together to a higher source to make a decision

You usually can't resolve these type of disagreements by yourself. Your senior management and HR department should be able to assist you with these issues. There are a lot of things that will need to be taken into consideration; like does one of the parties fall in a "protected" status group and so do we need to concern ourselves with discrimination. There are so many variables in these situations that you need professional help.

Creating A Consensus Focus

Three techniques to create consensus:

1. Ground Rules
2. Establish the definition of consensus
3. Consensus check

There are three techniques to use to create a consensus focus.

First, ground rules establish the baseline on how to maintain focus. Some key ground rules are:

•Everyone speaks

•Respect the speaker

•Avoid "bar" or "sidebar" discussions

•Titles are left outside the door

<<space>>Next, you need to establish a definition of consensus. Let's see if we can come up with one. Starting on the left here, what is your definition of consensus? <<put definitions on white board>>

This is the one I like to use. **I can live with that and support it.** That places it all right there.

<<space>> Finally, you need to perform a consensus check. It is a simple method of reaffirming consensus and reminds participants that they are responsible for the decisions. Use this frequently to make sure participants feel empowered.

Decide if Agreement is Necessary
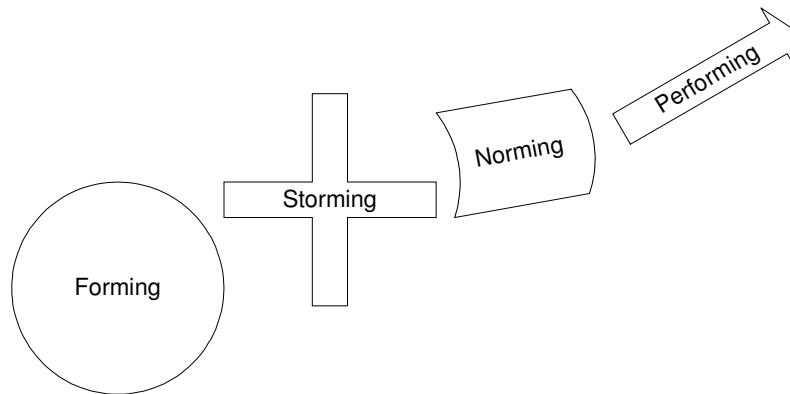
Disagreements are an essential part of group development. Most of us have heard about the Forming, Storming, Norming, Performing evolution. Disagreements eventually lead to creation of a group solution. However, many times you can be taken off track very easily. So before stepping into a disagreement, evaluate it to see if agreement on the particular topic is required to make an overall decision. If not, get the group's agreement that while it may be important, it can wait, and to put it on the issue board for later discussion.

It is important to allow the group time to come to a solution on it's own. That way everyone is already bought into the idea.

Take Control As Necessary

- Take control if:
  - A consensus solution is not reached in a few minutes
  - The discussion loses focus
  - Only two or three people are involved in the discussion
  - You suspect the discussion may become emotionally charged

One of the hardest things to do is to decide when you need to step in and take control of the discussion. This slide notes four common times when you should step in. There are a lot of ways in which to interrupt the discussion and determining which one to use is going to depend on the situation.

For time when things are still relatively calm, speaking up at a pause in conversion works well. If things are a bit more energetic, you may need to interrupt someone. Be sure to apologize for doing so and state the reason you did.

If things are more heated, using the old time-out signal or stepping between the primary antagonists holding your hands as a stop sign may be necessary. You may wish to call a break at this time to let things cool down a bit before trying to address the situation.

In any case, once you have the group's attention, explain that you would like to go about the discussion in another way.

Consensus Exercise

Accelerated Consensus Building

Led by: Mark Molesworth

Mark is going to lead us in an exercise to show how you can rapidly identify a solution to an issue.

<<20 Min>>

<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 20px;">

But is that Consensus?

Can you live with that and support it?

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Thank you Mark. Now many of you may be thinking that this sounds more like majority rule rather than consensus. However, once you have reached this point, you can then ask the group "Can you live with that and support it?" If so, you have reached consensus. If not, then you only have to address the issues pertaining to this particular solution rather than all of the issues relating to all of the possible solutions. Since it is a silent exercise, you have short-circuited those that may dominate the conversation and ensured that everyone had an equal input into the preferred solution.
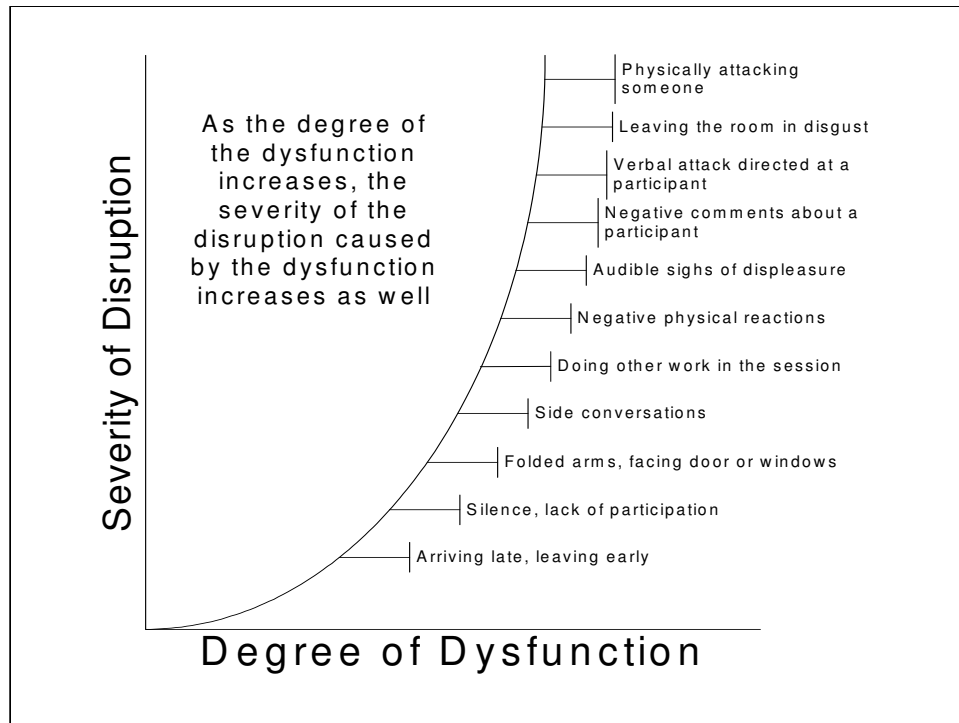
Other Ways To Achieve Consensus

- Identify alternatives
- Identify strengths and weaknesses of each alternative
- Create a hybrid
- Use a ranking or weighted scoring system
- Create a cost/benefit analysis

Here are some other ways to create consensus within a team environment.

Basically you want to converge on a solution. If you are still struggling, make one last attempt by reminding them of the definition, then selecting the alternative that the most people agree on and ask, "What is the least amount of change we need to make to have it be acceptable for you?" After identifying the changes, ask everyone if those changes are acceptable and if not, what are the least amount of changes to the changes that need to be made.

If all else fails, move on. Take a break or move on to the next topic and return to the issue later. Sometimes you just need a fresh perspective.

Severity of Disruption

As the degree of the dysfunction increases, the severity of the disruption caused by the dysfunction increases as well

Physically attacking someone

Leaving the room in disgust

Verbal attack directed at a participant

Negative comments about a participant

Audible sighs of displeasure

Negative physical reactions

Doing other work in the session

Side conversations

Folded arms, facing door or windows

Silence, lack of participation

Arriving late, leaving early

Degree of Dysfunction

One of the key barriers to reaching consensus is caused by dysfunctional behavior within the group.

One other thing our consensus exercise did is minimize the amount of dysfunction that could be displayed. It is one thing to say something that perhaps is inappropriate or unhelpful. It is another to write it down for the world to see.

Notice on this chart, as the degree of dysfunction increases, the severity of the disruption increases as well. This chart lists some typical dysfunctional behaviors. And if you think the top item is an extreme that will never happen to you, I have heard of stories that would prove you wrong. Anything can happen if you do not control the situation.

Understanding Dysfunctional Behavior

- What is it?
- What does it look like?
- How do I recognize it?
- What should I do?

First, we need to understand what is dysfunctional behavior. It can be defined as any activity by a participant which is conspicuously or unconsciously a substitution for expressing displeasure with the session content, the current process, or an outside factor. Just because someone exhibits dysfunctional behavior, does not make them a bad person. We all have probably done this.

The key here is to separate the symptom from the root cause. Treat this behavior as a sign that the participate is asking for help. Dysfunctional behavior is a symptom that is masking the real issue, which is typically the content of the session or the process in which the session is being run.

Dysfunctional behavior tends to get worse over time. So just ignoring the issue hoping it will go away will seldom work. Fortunately, like most problems, if you addressing it early makes it easier to change.

Managing Dysfunction

- Conscious Prevention
- Early Detection
- Clean Resolution

There are three steps to managing dysfunctional behavior

The first is conscious prevention. What can you do before the group even gets together to prevent or mitigate the dysfunctional behavior.

Second, as noted earlier, is early detection. The sooner you address the problem, the more likely your success.

Finally, you need a clean resolution where everyone knows what is expected of them.

Conscious Prevention Strategies

- Assigning seats
- Adding ground rules
- Making sure you interact with particular people
- Paying close attention to particular reactions
- Holding informal meetings during breaks

The best way to stop dysfunctional behavior from occurring is to stop it from starting. As they say, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Start out by knowing your participants. Find out who is not in favor of the session and who feels they have something to lose depending upon the outcome. Find out who is not on favorable terms with one another and who tends to point out problems rather than create solutions. Once you have your list, here are some things that you can do to help overcome the potential issues before they occur.

Assigned seating can be a bit awkward, but that can be overcome. This is especially useful in new groups who are not real familiar with each other. Or plan on having an exercise that requires a particular mix of expertise and use that to explain the seating arrangements.

If you add ground rules, make sure you use the appropriate processes to ensure the group takes ownership of the rules.

Be sure to "pump" the quiet, shy ones in the group. Don't forget to reward them for even trying.

Watch for the symptoms of dysfunction. If I stand here like this, it should give you an indication that I am unhappy. Address it now. Don't let it fester.

Don't forget to work the group during the breaks. Sometimes the feedback from these informal meetings can save the entire day.

Early Detection

Look for:

- Participants who are not speaking
- Folded arms
- Participants who can't wait for the next break to get back to other work
- Side conversations

Find:

- Where are the energy centers?
- Where are the cliques?
- Where are the conflicts?
- Who is the naysayer and who is the positive thinker?

As a leader, you must constantly be on the lookout for the early forms of dysfunction. Look for those are not speaking. I have a bit of a problem with the folded arm one. As a big guy, this position is comfortable for me and does not necessarily indicate that I am having a dysfunctional moment. Can anyone tell me how you as a meeting leader could tell? (That I sit up and change position when I am speaking; my positioning is more relaxed; etc). As a meeting leader I can tell you that I hate laptops. Even though I am a laptop user I can say this. When people are in my meetings, I want them focused on the topic at hand not cleaning out e-mail (which is one of my top ground rules) or even thinking about looking at e-mail during the next break. I want my participants to speak to each other during breaks. We will talk more about what you can do about this in just a moment. Obviously, side conversations can be really disruptive to the group cohesion.

Some of the things you need to be looking for are the energy centers. Who are the people who routinely speak. These folks can be your allies. Where are the cliques? There is nothing more depressing than to walk in and find all the IT folks on one side of the table and all of the business folks on the other side. Obviously you need to be looking for where the conflicts or potential conflicts are. Finally be sure to identify those naysayers and positive thinkers.

Clean Resolution

- Address dysfunction effectively
  - Approach Privately or Generally
  - Empathize with the symptom
  - Address the root cause
  - Get agreement on a solution

The earlier you detect and address dysfunction, the more likely you will be able to resolve it. Be sure to follow the strategy listed here. Either approach the individual privately during a break or address the issue in a general manner to the group as a whole so that the person would not feel picked out. Empathize with with the symptom, but address the root cause then get that persons agreement on a solution.

Let's take a look at some of our earlier examples. What could we do with someone who just isn't speaking. (Change manner of discussion; do a session like our exercise earlier; go around the table.) How about the person who can't wait to leave or is doing other work during the session? (Ground rules; plan time for other activities; adjust agenda.) What can we do about those sidebar conversations? (call on them to speak regarding the topic; ground rules; stand behind them.) Think about what your 3rd grade teacher did in the classroom. Now there is someone who knows how to handle dysfunctional behavior! Often the more subtle the more effective.

AVOID!!!

- Correcting the person publicly
- Getting angry or speaking emotionally yourself
- Losing your objectivity or neutrality

Here are some things to avoid.

Correcting people in a public setting is bad manners and is likely to increase dysfunction rather than address it.

Be careful about your own emotions. You could easily find yourself in a negative feedback loop and that will drive the rest of the participants into dysfunctional behavior. CONTROL!

It is often important for you to be effective as a meeting leader to be seen as neutral. You don't care what the solution is as long as the group agrees that it is the right solution. Once you lose that objectivity you now have become an opponent and have lost a lot of the opportunity to control the situation. That doesn't mean you can't lead a group down a particular path, but it has to be a path the group wants to travel down.

Reward Functional Behavior

- Supply positive reinforcement
  - Give them more of your attention
  - Give them nods & smiles
  - Give them the floor when they request it
- At a break, comment on their participation

We can't forget how far a good word will go. A "good idea" or "excellent comment" can go along way to ensure long term healthy group.

Exercise

List actions that can address each
dysfunctional behavior listed on the flip chart.

For this exercise, each flip chart has two common dysfunctional behaviors. I want each group to come up with two or three strategies to manage each behavior.

<<20 Min>>`

Questions

Do you have any questions?

Thank You

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Thank you all for attending. It has been my pleasure to deliver this material to you and I hope you found it of use. There are session surveys that we ask you fill out so that we can find better ways of serving your needs. As a note, much of this lesson was based off training I received in a course called *"The Effective Facilitator"* held by Leadership Strategies. Their information is on the slide here. If you have any questions down the road, don't hesitate to drop me a line. We do plan on posting this presentation to the EPM website and we will let you know when it is available.

Thanks again.